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NINTH YEAR COMPOSITION FROM MODELS

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Individuality in teaching has always been, in the very nature of the case, an actuality and not a goal, as it seems to be in the mad race of the present day. Perhaps in the teaching of English it is as marked as in any other department of modern formal education. One has only to discuss with one's colleagues methods of instruction in first-year high-school composition to be reminded of the illimitable possibilities as well as of the truism that where one person succeeds another fails.

The comparatively recent change in school organization which has admitted to the high school pupils a year younger than before, and with necessarily less training, has produced an altered psychological situation which requires an altered method of approach. This alteration, experienced teachers and educators are recognizing, should lie in the direction of greater definiteness.

The use of models in composition work is one device by which pupils can be helped to direct their efforts and to feel the satisfaction of accomplishment. Some teachers maintain that models hamper instead of help, and that compositions preceded by the reading of them lack the originality which they would otherwise possess. This charge is no doubt true in some cases, but in the freshman English course of one large high school, interest as well as a sense for unity and coherence, sometimes without even mentioning the terms, has been engendered.

As has already been intimated, the phases of composition writing which can be touched in a first-year course vary directly with the number of people who teach such classes. One realizes in offering a set of models that the set will never be used intact, but models on subjects adapted to the experi-

ence of boys and girls and written with a simplicity that they can hope to approximate are not readily available.

For convenience the models have been grouped under the heads of narration and description, although in actual practice the former involves much of the latter. Unquestionably, personal experience and knowledge is the keystone of success. Because most people go through life for some time without having extraordinary adventures, they need to be helped to recognize the significance of what goes on around them every day,—in other words, they need to cultivate the “daily theme eye.” The best way to help high-school freshmen to acquire it is by showing them what other people have done in recounting entertainingly incidents in which they have had a vital part or of which they have been appreciative observers.

Most boys and girls can relate readily what they have done at one time or another, but in recounting the incident they are apt to refer only casually to any emotion they may have experienced. The following model does just this and might well precede a first assignment in narration. An analysis of it will show that, with the exception of the word “alarmed,” it contains no words registering emotion. Its value lies in humor, which might be made a part of the assignment.

ALMOST A RUNAWAY*

As I was passing the post-office yesterday morning, a sudden gust of wind caught the corner of my cloak and sent it flapping out wildly behind me. A horse standing by the pavement took fright at the noise and the bright color of the cloak lining. He wheeled around abruptly, overturning the buggy to which he was harnessed and throwing out its occupant, a little boy. I was very much alarmed when I saw that the boy held onto the lines as the horse started to run, and that he and the vehicle were being dragged along dangerously close to each other. Fortunately at this juncture, a man sprang forward and, seizing the horse by the bridle before he had fairly started, succeeded in checking and quieting him. Little damage had been done. The boy got up, scared but unhurt. I drew my offending garment closer about me and passed on.

In a second assignment the writer may again be the chief actor. This time he may be instructed to make his feelings

*Newcomer, Alphonso G.: **A Practical Course in English Composition.**

the center of interest and to recount them in climactic order. The following incident was written by a freshman to fulfil such an assignment:

AN EXCITING MOMENT

Outside it was dark and cloudy, an ideal night for Hallowe'en, and I had been confined to the limits of my room. With a do or die look on my face I decided to go out. Creeping silently down stairs I got outside without mishap, but no matter where I went I had visions of a terrible scolding if I was caught. My pleasure spoiled for the night, I returned and cautiously ascended the stairs. Just then the hall door opened and I heard my father remark to my mother that I was unusually quiet that night. Rapidly shedding my outer garments as a duck sheds water, I jumped into bed. Assuming an angelic expression, I held my breath and waited. My father tiptoed in and looked at me for a long, fearful minute. Had he observed closely he might have noticed that my feet seemed bulky and my pose unnatural. Out he went as silently as he had come in, and breathing a sigh of relief, I whispered, "A narrow escape!"

Incidents may be approached from another angle—the writer may be only an observer of the action. When first attempted, incidents of this type may be limited to observations centering primarily around one character and may be told without conscious effort to reproduce emotion. The following incident gains its interest from the element of humor, which might be made a part of the assignment.

A DUDE'S DISCOMFITURE*

It was in the Southern Pacific Depot. We were sitting in a car of an out bound suburban train, looking out of the window, waiting for the train's departure. A young fellow, whose dress proclaimed him a "dude," came sauntering down the station platform, watching the people who were descending from a train that had just arrived. Three girls talking and laughing merrily together seemed to

* Newcomer, Alphonso G.: A Practical Course in English Composition.

absorb his attention. As he passed by, he turned his head to watch them, when he was suddenly brought to a standstill by coming into collision with one of the pillars of the arcade. A particularly merry laugh from the girls just then, who may or may not have seen him, made him flush hotly. He glanced up at our car. We at least had seen him, and the row of smiling faces that filled the windows from one end of the car to the other was not comforting. He hurried away doubtless reflecting that this was an unsympathetic world.

After some practice even freshmen ought to recount incidents revealing some degree of skill in portraying character and securing a definite climax. In the first of the following incidents character is revealed in a sufficiently tangible, yet artistic way to be appreciated by boys and girls. In the second, the revelation of character is just as truly there, although it is presented in a more mature way. The spirit of both is definitely suggestive.

THE RIVALS*

There were two rivals in our class. It was near the close of the year, and they had maintained nearly equal standing. We were taking the final examination in arithmetic. The last example was particularly hard. One of the rivals sat in front of me, the other just across the aisle.

The hour was drawing to a close and the boy in front of me had completed his paper. The boy opposite had worked rapidly till he came to the last example; then he hesitated, and stopped.

The hour was nearly up when the teacher left the room for a moment. From a few seats back came a loud whisper: "How do you work the last?" The answer was given. The boy opposite brightened up and leaned forward to complete his work. Then he hesitated, blushed, laid down his pen, and folded his paper.

THE PERFECT EXAMPLE

"Practice what you preach!" I have time and again heard my very practical preacher uncle exclaim. He never prayed without introducing the

* Newcomer, Alphonso G.: A Practical Course in English Composition.

expression, or a similar one, toward the close of his prayer. On one occasion he perfectly exemplified his admonition.

A bright, warm morning in June found the windows and doors of his farm-house open to the fresh, sweet scents that blew from field and meadow and woodland. Barnyard fowls, ponies, dogs, inquisitive pigs—all busily performed their natural exercises, as my uncle's family, having heard the usual lesson from the Scriptures, kneeled in prayer before the great colonial hearth, sniffing the incense of sizzling coffee and of snowy pones of bread which made the mouth water.

My uncle had almost finished his prayer when a scraping noise sounded at his back. No one dared to open his eyes; the prayer had to be completed first. The scraping sound neared the hearth. I caught the scent of a pig, and my heart thumped as with my inner eyes I saw the rich pones of bread in danger. My uncle was just saying, "Lord, teach us to pray"—the phrase which invariably led to its companion part—when I heard a pig's grunt right at the hearth, and instantly the muffled thump of my uncle's foot against some soft object, and loud squeals, and my uncle remonstrating, "Ye would filch my bread, would ye! I'll teach ye a lesson!"

Then he calmly concluded the morning's prayer: "Lord, teach us to watch as well as pray."

It is frequently contended that freshmen can not successfully use their imaginations in composition work and that personal experience should be the basis of all their narration. There is a range, however, within which this contention is not true—the range of their own personal imaginings. The writer is presenting the following themes to show what can be done with an enthusiastic class.

A conversation between inanimate objects is a good topic. They may be given human qualities, but if they are not quite true to life, nothing is necessarily detracted from the success of the composition.

A TEMPEST IN A CABINET

The keeper took his keys from his pocket and locked the museum door for the night. All was still.

Then a great sigh swept over the building. They were free!

The statues began talking quietly together, but suddenly a great commotion was heard in a cabinet of miscellaneous curios. The little gold mirror studded with diamonds had tossed her head and said, "Oh, me! I'm *so* bored! All the things in this cabinet are *so* vulgar!" She turned her nose up a wee bit higher and gave a little sniff. "Look at that over there!" She pointed at a stone spear-head.

The poor spear-head blushed and stammered something unintelligible, but a silver cuff-button spoke up, "Who are you that you shou—?"

"Me? I am Queen Elizabeth's hand mirror if you please. I often helped her powder her nose. Do you wonder now why I am so bored?"

The cuff-button said, "Huh! Well, *I* am George Washington's cuff-button. I'm sure that's just as good or better. Queen Elizabeth was always stuck up anyway. It's a wonder you weren't worn out long ago."

The two began to quarrel, and finally a pewter plate said, "I think that poor, old quill pen over there is better than either of you. *It* signed the Declaration of Independence. Miss Queen Elizabeth, you should be punished. I think I'll put you in a corner."

With a good deal of puffing and pushing the mirror was finally left alone in the corner where she sulked and grumbled the whole evening. But queerest of all, the next morning when the keeper arrived they were all in their proper places. I wonder how they got there. Don't you?

THE HOUR AND THE MINUTE HAND

At noon when the two hands of the clock were close together the following conversation took place.

"Well, here you are again, old slow poke," said the Minute Hand. "It certainly took you long enough to get here."

"All right, Mr. Minute Hand, I got here just the same, didn't I?" asked the Hour Hand.

"Yes, but I made twelve trips to your one," re-

plied the Minute Hand. "You are the slowest thing I ever saw."

"All right Mr. Minute Hand, you may call me slow, but I want you to understand that I am as important as you are," said the Hour Hand.

"Ho! Ho! Listen to that. How do you make that out?" asked the Minute Hand.

"Well, only for me nobody would look at you because what good would it be to know the minute if you did not know the hour, and if it were not for me, no one would know the number of trips you had made."

By this time the speedy Mr. Minute Hand had gotten so far away from Mr. Hour Hand that he did not think that a reply could be heard, so we presume that the argument will be continued when they meet again at twelve.

The study of description, like the study of narration, must begin with as simple an assignment as possible. The description of a building combines at once the personal and the tangible. In Hitchcock's *Junior English Book* the description of Benjamin Franklin's birthplace, although extremely simple in form and lacking in artistic merit, presents very concretely point of view, arrangement of details, and the use of imagination in making suppositions. The following description of a cabin offers the same essentials with helpful variation.

A CABIN*

In the woods below us was a clearing surrounded by a wall of dense evergreens. At the bottom of the gulch trickled a stream of sweet mountain water. In the opening on the opposite side of the stream was a bed of grass. Here and there were old moss-covered logs and brush piles.

Then, as our eyes followed the path which led up the opposite bank, we caught sight of a small cabin which seemed to be standing out from the side of the hill. It was made of boards which had been manufactured without a sawmill, and the eaves came to the ground so that it looked like a potato

* Newcomer, Alphonso G.: A Practical Course in English Composition.

house. Above it towered some gigantic firs which with swaying branches threatened to fall on the little cabin and bury it.

As we approached, we saw that the cabin had been recently deserted, and we inferred from the axes and saws which were scattered here and there that the desertion had been a hasty one. The loneliness told the story. Perhaps the rancher came into the woods to seek a fortune and went out to seek a wife.

More difficult than the type just discussed, because it offers greater opportunity for subtlety, is the description of persons. The theme which follows combines very obviously the description of a person's appearance at a particular time with a bit of interpretation of his character. It offers at the same time good vocabulary and varied sentence structure.

A SLAVIC PEASANT*

There, with his shoulder propped against the jamb of the door, stood a tall, broad-shouldered peasant, about thirty years of age. In costume, he was a typical tramp; in face and figure, a genuine Slav—a rare specimen of the race. He wore a red cotton shirt incredibly dirty and tattered, full trousers of coarse, homemade linen, and on one of his feet were the remains of a rubber boot, which on the other was an old leather boot-leg. His light, reddish—brown hair was tangled all over his head, and small chips, straws and bits of paper stuck in the snarls; all these things also adorned his luxuriant light-reddish beard, which covered his chest like a fan. His long, pallid, weary face was lighted up by large, pensive blue eyes, which gazed at me with a caressing smile; and his lips, which were handsome, although a trifle pale, also smiled beneath his reddish mustache. This smile seemed to say: "This is the sort of fellow I am—don't condemn me."

Landscapes also are difficult for novices, in the first place, because it is hard to arrange details in such a way as not to make the result mechanical, and, in the second, the effects of time and weather are elusive. The two following descriptions have been selected and used to illustrate just these

* Crandall's First Year Book in English.

elements which seem fundamental to any degree of success. The first one takes a subject with which any pupil is familiar, describes what is seen in receding order, and aptly presents a single impression of the whole. The left to right arrangement in the second one is helpfully obvious, but not detrimentally mechanical. The feeling, too, that is expressed in it is worthy of imitation.

When the young men awoke they found that their windows looked out upon a prospect of soft and tranquil loveliness, quiet and peaceful as a happy dream. Immediately below the windows was a terrace, and beyond the terrace an orchard of fruit-trees, then leafless, but just breaking into blossom, the twisted branches gray with lichens and sparkling with dew drops; and beyond this again a stretch of park and pastures and vineyards, and then, in the far distance, the Jura Mountains, with their dark fir forests and escarpments of white rocks. Between the windows and these distant hills shadowy gradations of light revealed the ridges of vineyard and woodland with a delicate, faint tracery of outline, and a clear distinctness, in the softly tinted morning air—*The Countess Eve*, J. H. Shorthouse.

Dawn was breaking as I once more gained the summit of the light. From my splendid vantage point in this stalwart buttressed castle of the sea, I could see on my right the sand dunes of the Boston coast, broken only by the pillar of another light, which even now was turning pale—sickly—going out; in front, as before, the long stretch of the sea, marked only by a distant light ship, and near it a pilot-boat making for a six-masted schooner. To my left I saw the sun rising glorious, splashing the water with her golden paint—water that morning still as glass, save where it rippled over the rocks of the ledge, for it was low tide. A few minutes more and it was daylight, the machinery was stopped, the lens ceased revolving. Our light was out.—*The Outlook*.

I wish to present as a last model one which combines both narration and description with a simplicity and a dignity befitting the theme. Surely high-school freshmen can not fail

to appreciate the significance of a part at least of what goes on around them. Can they not somehow be led to give expression to their finer thoughts?

IN THE CEMETERY*

A few Sundays since I strolled out to the cemetery. Here and there upon the mounds were seated groups of young girls talking and laughing loudly. A man, leading a smiling child, a little girl perhaps four years old, passed by with bowed head and approached a long newly made grave. The father knelt uncovered at its side. The little one glanced up with smiling wonderment, then knelt beside him. I looked again; the father had risen and before leaving was reverently replacing the dirt of the mound, where a careless foot had marred its symmetry. The child stopped, made a few gestures with a tiny hand, then turned with a satisfied smile to the father and they passed on. The laughing of the heedless groups jarred upon me, and I walked away.

It may be well to add that the above assignments represent the work done by a freshman class for a little more than half a year. Usually more than one model was read for the sake of variety and emphasis. The models here presented have been chosen with a view to giving definiteness to the composition work and to arousing interest and enthusiasm. Each topic is of such a nature that it can be drawn from the experience of the pupils, and the style of the models is not so masterful that high-school pupils can not hope to approximate it.

* Newcomer, Alphonso G.: A Practical Course in English Composition.

TWENTIETH CENTURY LITERATURE IN THE SCHOOLS

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One of the chief reasons for the success of *Main Street* is that it appealed to thousands of untrained readers who never expected to find within the covers of a book a recognizable pattern of life. These thousands included scores possessed with the fixed idea that literature equals Burke; Burke equals boredom; therefore literature equals boredom. Burke is a mere symbol in the syllogism. For Burke, we may substitute De Quincey, or Addison, or Irving, or Dryden, or Wordsworth, or Collins, or Gray. These classics are for the comparatively mature and for the intellectually elect.

As will appear from the course of study in literature drawn up especially for the Washington Irving High School, the inclusion of twentieth century texts in the course does not mean the exclusion of the classics. There are some classics that seem to us indispensable beacons to the young pilgrims whose feet we are trying to set in the right path, but our guiding principle is the old reliable, "Proceeding from the known to the unknown." In the study of literature we may well begin with the near and the familiar, in order to interpret the distant and unfamiliar.

Additional reasons for giving the writings of our contemporaries the place of honor in a curriculum are: that our students may better understand the trend of their own times; that they may know more of what makes living interesting to other persons than themselves and may understand the motives and points of view of other people; that they may have the right sort of standards to guide them in the future in choosing books to read and plays to see, as those books and plays appear; and that they may be saved from the over-advertized and the sensational. Contemporary literature has a community value for the student, since it gives him an additional intelligent interest in what the world at large reads and discusses and enables him to share an interest in the books and plays which are mentioned in current reviews. Contemporary literature has for him an aesthetic value because it gives him an opportunity to become familiar with the modern endeavor to express beauty in new forms. Socially it is of immediate value to him because it arouses his interest in the betterment movements of his own day. He will not turn

unmoved from Galsworthy's *Justice* or Jane Addam's *Twenty Years of Hull House* or Lillian Wald's *The House on Henry Street*. Contemporary literature has for the student most important of all a unique ethical value, for it allows him ample opportunity for discussion of problems of conduct and behavior in present day settings. For example, in *Pride and Prejudice*, charming in its atmosphere of a century and a quarter ago, the family life described is so remote from that of today that any comparison loses its force; whereas in *Alice Adams* we find a picture of a home which contains all too many reflections of the sordid aspects of American life, a picture from which many lessons may be drawn.

In a community like ours, where the population is so largely foreign, we are unlikely to forget how important it is for the students to read good books in the idiom of the present day, for from them they will be far more likely to learn to talk and write naturally and easily than from the eighteenth century essay, the seventeenth century play, or early nineteenth century poetry.

The practice of teaching contemporary literature side by side with the older literature gives students, we discover, the realization that literature is continuous; that genius is a recurrent phenomenon; that at any moment there is a possibility of a wonderful new expression.

Let me conclude with the observation of one who said: "I enjoy teaching a subject which is constantly changing, which keeps me constantly busy keeping up with it, and prevents my getting into a rut."

The young respond readily, even eagerly, to the spirit of their times. Contemporary fiction sets them searching for the beauty that lies hidden in the commonplace. Contemporary biography gives them a practical program for purposeful living. Contemporary drama practises them in an intelligent attitude towards the theatre. Contemporary essays help them to play with modern modes of thought. Contemporary poetry holds out the hope of lasting enchantments.